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## Lenten Sermon 6: The Sign of Mystery: Luke 23:33, 1958

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## THE SIGN OF MYSTERY

Luke 23: 33      And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.

It was nine o'clock on Good Friday morning. It was probably a fair and warm spring morning when the procession finally reached Calvary. Perhaps a little rain had fallen during the night as it does so often in the Holy Land at that season of the year. The doves were circling above the hill. The birds sang in the Olive trees beneath the city wall. It was a beautiful morning, a day for joy and hope. It was an unusually good Friday.

I am certain that our Lord saw all that. He who had watched the lillies of the field, the corn ripening for harvest, the moon standing above the valley of the Kidron--He would surely see once more the world as God had made it, beautiful and fair, a world of song and joy and hope, a world so far removed from the pain and tears and blood and hate with which the procession came to the little green hill beyond the gates of the Holy City.

And they crucified Him there! He was surrounded once more by the strange, continuing goodness of all His creation except its crown, the body and soul of man to which evil had come. The rest of creation was so beautiful and fair, but the heart of man was black with evil and sin.

They began to dig the hole for the Cross. The Crosspieces were fitted. His young body was laid upon the beams. One nail was hammered home, then the second and the third. His arms and feet were bound tight with ropes because the nails might not hold the body racked with pain. Soldiers raised the Cross upright. There was a dull thud as it fell in the hole dug for it.

His blood started to flow from hands and feet. The aching, tearing pain of crucifixion began. They crucified Him there!

If we are really to see the meaning of the Cross, we must now go to Calvary and stand there with Him. This will be very good for us. We must stand there not as contemporaries because it would be too easy for us to join the mob. We must stand there today as twentieth century men and women, the seventieth generation since that first Good Friday. We stand there as the end products of 1900 years of Christianity. We must stand at the edge of the crowd for a few moments and look very closely at the scene before us. Such an experience ought to be very much worthwhile, perhaps eternally decisive and everlastingly worthwhile.

Ever since Calvary there have been thousands of people in the world who have tried to make Christianity reasonable. Countless books have been written on the evidences of Christianity. They have been designed to prove that after all Christianity is a very reasonable thing, that you can think it through, that it appeals to the processes of thought and logic, the canons of human knowledge. Perhaps we should say again that much of this is very dangerous nonsense. The Christian religion is not a reasonable religion in the normal sense of the word. It is true, of course, that we can move around inside of it by intellectual processes. We can formulate doctrines which are an exact reflection of the teachings of Holy Writ. We can reason from one proposition to another as theologians have done. We can work out conclusions on the basis of the inspired Word of God.

It must be said, however, that the great, basic truths are always and forever beyond reason. We cannot prove them by the ordinary laws of thought.



As we examine our Christian faith, we go ~~father~~<sup>farther</sup> and farther until ultimately we always come to aumping off place. We arrive at the place where reason ends. We come to the place where we stand either with folded hands or with hands holding a hammer. We stand in the place from which we must leap into the arms of God if we want to be a Christian. Calvary is always a place of mystery and of wonder. It is the final, burning focal point of the strange, heavenly ways of God with men. This we must always remember as we come to the Cross ourselves or when we try to bring others into its healing shadow.

Here, where we are now standing on the edge of the crowd at Calvary, is the ultimate mystery--the mystery of the Cross. This is the riddle of God which can be solved only by God and in God, and through His Holy Word. We should freely admit that this just does not make sense in the way in which human beings interpret it. It is not reasonable, this Cross, this mob and God hanging there in the cool of a spring morning! As we stand there, the first question that comes to us is: What is behind all this? How did it happen?

The answer to these questions comes from faith and not from reason. We are face to face, as nowhere else in time and history, with the mystery of the evil in man. The last, dark, bitter mystery of sin! Many centuries ago St. Anselm said to a young man who had his doubts and misgivings about the Christian Gospel: "You have not yet considered the seriousness of sin." It is true, of course, that our modern minds do not like that very much. We feel that by and large we are fairly good people. Our friends are fairly good people. People of other races and nations may sometimes be bad, but not we ourselves. Or if we are unusually intelligent, we go beyond that to say that

the notion of man's essential sinfulness is unhistorical and unscientific. We must throw off this burden on man which has filled him with such a sense of guilt. We must now be ready to go forward to a religion of humanity. We must trust in the essential goodness of mankind. We must believe in our power to remake our environment. We must try to lift ourselves by our bootstraps into a new and better world.

No man can stand at the foot of the Cross and believe in these notions. Here we are face to face with the mystery of sin. This is not a crowd of unreasonable, thoughtless men. This is a mob of bad men, evil men, who have come to crucify their God. The young man hanging on the Cross is 33 years old. He had committed no crime. For three years He had been engaged in a tremendous mission of healing and love. He had gone about doing good. And yet, they were now killing Him! The last thing He sees of humanity before He dies is a mob of grinning faces. The last thing He hears is a curse. The last thing He knows is hate and pain. Now all that does not square for one moment with our theories of progress, our shallow belief in the essential goodness of humanity and our false and fatal optimism concerning the destiny of the human race without God.

And so we turn again and again to our Bibles. There we find the answer to the mystery. We begin to believe and to understand the deep, dark problems which come to a climax at the Cross. We find something which fits into our world and makes it much more understandable. We discover that sin is always hate. It is hate of God and man. It is the breaking down of all friendship and all fellowship between heaven and earth. It is the separation of God from man and man from man. We discover now the reason for the Cross. It



is the end of our long separation, our loneliness, our wandering and our transgression. We had a love once, and we threw it out of the window of our broken lives. We had a home once, and we turned away from it in hate and sin. We had a Friend once, and we left Him to die on the Cross. The Cross is only the last and ultimate expression of the dark terror in our souls, the bitterness of our lives, and all the brutality and tyranny and injustice and greed which has piled up since Paradise Lost.

Having looked to the darkness of sin, we now turn back to the Cross to see some light in our darkness. Things become clearer, We being to understand this ultimate mystery. It may be that we cannot understand everything, but we are beginning to find an answer to the question. Why is that young man hanging there? By His grace we know that He is God. Since He is God, where are the legions of angels? What keeps Him on the wooden bed of pain? Three nails? Those slivers of metal, forged by human hands, cannot possibly pin down God. There must be something else which holds Him to his dying! We have seen from Holy Writ the mystery of man and the mystery of sin. We are now face to face with the mystery of God. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, is there on the Cross because He wants to be there. He had wanted to hang there from the foundation of the earth, and He still wants to. It is neither the nails nor the new ropes that hold Him to His dying. It is just love and nothing else! It is the perfect love of the perfect God and the perfect love of a perfect man. Here we are face to face with the friendship of God pouring itself down and away through the Cross. This is the miracle and the mystery of forgiveness. It is the restoration of fellowship with God and with man. We lost a friend, and He came back to us. We lost a love, and He gave it back to us. We lost a home, and He brought it back to the dust where we must live.

The mystery now becomes a little closer to our human understanding. It is still a mystery, as everything about God is, but we can see that it is and why it is. It is all strangely simple with the profound simplicity of God.

There are men who say that Christianity is a very complex thing. They report that they find it difficult to find their way through its message. We, however, can never forget that all of it is in two sentences, and that all of it is terribly personal. There is, first, always the cry of the defeated soul:

"God, be merciful to me, a miserable sinner." Then there is always the answering cry of the young man on the Cross, our Lord and Savior, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." This is the whole story.

Christianity is always the story of people who have come back again. David crying in the night, Peter stumbling into the dark in tears, Paul on the road to Damascus! Always and forever they dash the tears from their eyes because now they see life and time and sin and death and hate and pain with the eyes of Him who looked at us from the Cross, saw us as we were and are, and loved us nevertheless. "While we were yet sinners" God, through His only-begotten Son, gave us life and peace.

Now for a moment we ought to leave Calvary and bring all that we have learned down to our own time and life. There is one more mystery about the Sign of the Cross. If we look hard at the world and history, we see its strange continuing power. This power needs more emphasis in our day, especially among those who have felt that the Christian Gospel is helpless over against the evil might of man. Too often we followers of our Lord Jesus Christ believe the Gospel but we do not believe it hard enough. We approach it somewhat apologetically, and we bring it to men and women in the same way. Our



attitude is much the same as the attitude of the pagan who said to his god, "Between us, I suspect that you do not exist." Our religion must be like an Alpenstock which is so firm and sure and strong that it cannot be broken. We must have a faith which can stand up and take it! This means that we must stand at Calvary again and again in order to see the tremendous power of the love and mercy which broke the dominion of sin and gave us life and freedom and forgiveness.

To see this clearly is our task and our destiny, especially as twentieth century Christians. To the seeing eye of faith the Cross today is no longer a mystery. It is the strong power which stands alone above the fallen of the earth. It is the power of Him in whose eyes the past and the future are the eternal Now. It is the power of Him who knows us, even after all these years, who own Him as King and Lord and who walk with Him through tears and tribulation and trial and time to the ultimate destiny of grace which He has laid up in heaven for us. It is the continuing power of Him who will come at last not to a Cross but to a Throne. If we become His children, we have in Him, and in Him alone, the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory, forever and ever.